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ABSTRACT

Sixty-two adolescents, including 28 learning disabled (LD) and 34 nonLD Ss, participated in an examination of the relationship between social class indicators and delinquency. A review of the literature relating social class variables to school achievement, learning disabilities, and juvenile delinquency resulted in the selection of 14 social class indicators, including father's occupation and level of education, family size, music preference, magazine subscriptions, and participation in school functions and community affairs. Ss were assigned to four groups: LD/juvenile delinquent, LD, delinquent, and regular students. Differences in social class indicators among groups were determined using the chi-square statistic and Fisher's exact test. Analysis of the data suggested that LD students with certain social class characteristics should be considered at high risk for delinquency. (Author/CL)

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Social Class Indicators and the Relationship Between Learning Disabilities and Juvenile Delinquency

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Social Class Indicators and the Relationship Between
Learning Disabilities and Juvenile Delinquency

The relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency has been identified as a concern of both practitioners and other professionals among educational, medical, and juvenile justice groups, (Holte, 1972; Jacobson, 1974; Duane, 1978; Katzman, 1978). Federal agencies have joined the investigation of a learning disability/juvenile delinquency link because of the implications of such a relationship for delinquency prevention and control, (Murray, 1976; Comptroller General of the United States, 1977).

A relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency implies that a child handicapped by a learning disability could ultimately become delinquent. Two theoretical positions regarding a causal relationship, the school failure rationale and the susceptibility rationale, are offered as explanations of the process. The school failure rationale suggests that frequent failures in the classroom coupled with negative reactions from teachers and peers are responsible for the development of delinquency. The susceptibility rationale for a causal relationship suggests that certain personality characteristics contribute to the likelihood of delinquency among some learning disabled children.

Of these theories, the school failure rationale seems to be more plausible and receives more support from related research on the causes of juvenile delinquency, (Elliott & Voss, 1974). However, it ignores variables known to influence school performance and/or the development of delinquency other than a learning disability, (Polk and Schaffer, 1972; Elliott and Voss, 1974), particularly influences related to the child's social environment.

Most of the research on the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship has sampled the incarcerated delinquent population. Evidence of relationships between social class status and official delinquency (Reiss & Rhodes, 1961; Gold, 1963; Quay, 1966) and research relating social class status to school performance (Polk & Schaffer, 1972; Mayeske et.al., 1973) compel a closer examination of social class influences on the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship.

Quantitative studies on the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship consistently reveal a higher incidence of learning deficits among juvenile delinquents than is expected in a normal population. The Comptroller General of the United States (1977) reported that in prevalence studies conducted by his office 26% of all juvenile delinquents tested were found to have primary learning problems. Even higher levels of incidence were reported by Compton (1974), Berman, (1975), and Campbell (1978).

Observational data supporting a causal relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency is generally more abundant and credible. Observations and case studies recorded by juvenile judges, probation officers, psychologists, educators, and medical doctors suggest that the delinquent youth they encounter daily often exhibit specific learning disabilities, (Mulligan, 1974; Lewis, 1978; Katzman, 1978; Duane, 1978). Though observational data does not make the same case as empirical research, the combined observations of many respected professionals cannot be ignored.

It is important to note that previous research on the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship has been seriously hampered by two problems, the absence of a common operational definition of learning disability and the absence of an objective measurement of the condition. The effect of these two problems on research efforts is reflected in the variance of results.

The first problem could be solved if all the professions concerned with the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship adopted a common definition. The Specific Learning Disabilities Amendments to Public Law 94-142 have provided such a definition, (Federal Register, 1977). However, the same federal legislation that provided a very specific definition included only general parameters for identifying the condition. An objective measurement criteria is needed before appropriate research can be designed and conducted.

The present study was designed to determine the importance of selected social class indicators to the learning disability/juvenile delinquency relationship. Because of the difficulties in determining social class, individual social class indicators have frequently been tested in relation to delinquency and school performance. Specific social class variables have been found to be more accurate predictors than social class status alone, (Glueck, 1962; West & Farrington, 1977; Bradley, Caldwell, & Elardo, 1977).

Social class variables selected for inclusion in the present study have been demonstrated in the literature as having some relationship or lack of relationship to delinquency and/or school achievement. These

variables include: (1) father's occupation (Robins, 1972; Schroder, Crawford, & Wright, 1971; Kennet, 1972), (2) father's level of education (Robins, 1972; Thorndike, 1973; Schipman, 1977), (3) income (Kennet, 1972), (4) family size (Glueck, 1962; West, 1967; Thorndike, 1973; Rutter, 1975), (5) music preference (Glueck, 1962), (6) home ownership and home value (May, Alexander, & Holcombe, 1978), (7) type of newspaper and magazine subscriptions (Schroder et. al., 1971; Maynard, 1975), (8) voting in local, state, and national election, (9) participation in school functions (Mayeske et. al., 1973), (10) participation in community affairs (West, 1967; Schipman, 1977).

It was postulated that the lack of differences in social class variables between learning disabled and juvenile delinquent subjects would indicate the possibility of these variables being causal in nature and thereby substantiating the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

Method

Subjects

The same was composed of 62 students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years. These included 28 learning disabled students enrolled in the special education program and 34 non-learning disabled students randomly selected from the regular program of a local public high school.

Procedure

Subjects were assigned to one of four groups on the basis of an identified learning disability and/or delinquent behavior. The groups were: Group A(LD/JD), composed of 13 students identified as learning

disabled and delinquent; Group B(LD), composed of 15 students identified as learning disabled; Group C(JD), composed of 5 juvenile delinquent students; Group D(R), composed of 29 students who were neither learning disabled nor delinquent.

Learning disabled students in the study were diagnosed through the standard public school referral process. Each student received an individual psychological examination and was placed in the special education program on the recommendation of a multidisciplinary team.

Determination of delinquency was based on one of three procedures. Subjects who had been adjudicated, subjects identified as known delinquents by school officials, and those identified by a self-report delinquency scale, (Broder, Peters, & Zimmerman, 1978) were assigned to one of the delinquent groups, A(LD/JD) or C(JD).

Social class data was obtained by parent survey. The data generated by the survey was used in comparing the four groups in the following ways:

Group A(LD/JD) to Group B(LD)
Group A(LD/JD) to Group C(JD)
Group A(LD/JD) to Group D(R)
Group B(LD) to Group C(JD)
Group B(LD) to Group D(R)
Group C(JD) to Group D(R)

The chi square statistic and Fisher's exact test were used to analyze the data. The differences were accepted at the .05 level of significance.

Results

Significant differences were observed between the groups in five of the comparisons. Tables 1 and 2 provide a composite summary of the results.

Between Groups A(LD/JD) and B(LD) a significant difference was observed on family size.

Table 1. Differences Between Groups A(LD/JD) and B(LD; A(LD/JD) and C(JD); and A(LD/JD) and D(R)

Social Indicator	Group Comparisons A/B χ^2	df	A/C χ^2	df	A/D χ^2	df
Occupation	4.66	2	3.54[a]	2	17.66*	2
Education	.21	1	.49[a]		14.19*	1
Income	4.51	2	9.52*	2	15.25*	2
Music	.32	2	5.72*	2	5.78*	2
Family Size	10.11*	2	5.53	2	8.37*	2
Home Ownership	.09	1	.15[a]		6.35*	1
Home Value	1.35	1	.02[a]*		12.68*	1
Magazines	2.34	2	.76	2	5.71*	2
Newspapers	.10	2	4.26	2	8.39*	2
Vote Local	.81	1	.17[a]		9.76*	1
Vote State	.00	1	.72[a]		1.94	1
Vote National	.22	1	.56[a]		1.42	1
Community Action	.14	1	.49[a]		4.79*	1
School Functions	.03	1	.09[a]		21.86*	1

*$p < .05$

[a]Fisher's exact test

Table 2. Differences Between Groups B(LD) and C(JD); B(LD) and D(R) and C(JD) and D(R)

Social Indicator	Group Comparisons B/C χ^2	df	B/D χ^2	df	C/D χ^2	df
Occupation	.64[a]	2	5.46	2	3.00	2
Education	.72[a]		9.36*	1	3.79*	1
Income	2.45	2	16.69*	2	8.88*	2
Music	4.59	2	4.81	2	.81	1
Family Size	1.01	2	1.21	2	1.23	2
Home Ownership	.12[a]		7.33*	1	1.02	1
Home Value	.23[a]		2.81		.31	1
Magazines	.36	2	.91	2	1.58	2
Newspapers	4.87	2	9.44*	2	.43	2
Vote Local	.50[a]		3.46	1	.13	1
Vote State	.60[a]		4.07*	1	.61	1
Vote National	.30[a]		5.50*	1	.01	1
Community Action	.75[a]		2.24	1	.47	1
School Functions	.13[a]		21.10*	1	1.87	1

*$p < .05$

[a]Fisher's exact test

Significant differences observed between Group A(LD/JD) and Group C(JD) included the following: family income, parents' preference in listening music, and home value.

Analyses of GroupsA(LD/JD) and D(R) revealed significant differences on twelve social class indicators including father's occupation, education of household head, family income, parents' preference in listening music, family size, home ownership, home value, type of magazine subscriptions, type of newspaper subscriptions, voting in local elections, participation in community action meetings, and participating in school functions.

There were no significant differences observed between Group B(LD) and Group C(JD).

Between Groups B(LD) and D(R) significant differences were noted on the following social class indicators: education level, family income, home ownership, type of newspaper subscriptions, voting in state elections, voting in national elections and participating in school functions.

Significant differences observed between Groups C(JD) and D(R) included: education level of household head, and family income.

Discussion

Results suggest that social class status as represented by selected social class indicators should be considered an important variable in the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency.

The absence of significance differences between learning disabled and delinquent students on any of the social class indicators implies that these students have comparable social status and background. Similar home

environments and other influences of social class may contribute to similar school experiences of failure and frustration. The additional pressure imposed on a student by a learning disability may contribute to the development of delinquent behavior.

Significant differences observed between Group A(LD/JD) and Group D(R) clearly indicate that these two groups are not the same. Father's occupation, level of education and income are variables commonly used for assigning social class stauts, (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Significant differences on all three of these variables in addition to differences on other social class variables provide strong support for the conclusion that students identified as learning disabled and delinquent are not of the same social class status as regular students.

Results of this study are consistent with prior research relating social class variables to school performance and to delinquency. It appears that these variables are causal in nature, and that children having certain social class characteristics, also identified as learning disabled, should be considered high risk for delinquency.

The implications of these findings for the prevention of delinquency include the need for early screening for learning disabilities among children with specific social class characteristics. Early diagnosis and remediation could negatively influence the emergence of delinquent behaviors by assuring successful school experiences. If appropriate support is not part of the social class structure of certain families, children from these families might clearly benefit from instructional programming planned with careful attention to this deficit.

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